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### Review of Livia Kohn: Introducing Daoism

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*Introducing Daoism*. By LIVIA KOHN. New York: Routledge, 2009. 296 pp. ISBN-10: 0415439981 ISBN-13: 978-0415439985 (pbk.).

Anyone who has included Daoism in a course on “world religions” and has marked exams and essays on this topic might share the impression that students have much more difficulties with understanding this religious tradition than with most of the other great religions. This is presumably due to the extremely complex history of that tradition with its numerous local variants. It is also due to the peculiar teaching methods of the Daoist traditions themselves. Finally, the history of Western academic studies of Daoism is very short, and few useful introductory works have been written that address neither highly specialized experts nor a broad lay and esoteric public but an educated readership such as students and academics.

Livia Kohn has written the first introduction to Daoism that takes the format of a college textbook. For those familiar with her work it appears like a note form summary of her broad range of published works, especially her *Daoism and Chinese Culture*. The book is organized in an “introduction” plus 13 chapters of roughly equal length (all between 15 and 20 pp.) that are grouped in four parts. Each chapter is structured didactically in starting with a short abstract of the main contents of the chapter followed by a list of 4–7 bullet-points of the ‘main topics covered’ which basically give the main subtitles of the chapters. At the end of each chapter a half-page summary of ‘Key-points you need to know’ is added in the form of a grey boxed list of 3–6 bullet-points followed by three ‘Discussion questions’ which in most cases try to relate the historical material to present day life, and a list of 8–11 English works for ‘Further reading’ (Anna Seidel’s *La divinisation de Lao-tseu* is the only French book included!). Other helpful didactic devices can be found at the beginning and end of the book: a ‘Dynastic chart’, ‘Pronunciation guide’ and ‘Map of China’ follow the table of contents; two appendices on the ‘Chronology of Daoist History’ including major events (8 pp.) and on ‘The Daoist Canon’ (4 pp.); a glossary with Daoist terms and an index conclude the book. We do not find a single Chinese character in the text of the book (including glossary and index). The book thus mainly addresses English speaking students of religion.

The author has chosen to avoid lengthy narratives, the chapters are divided into 4–6 parts that are further divided into 2–5 subparts, that are sometimes further divided so that no titled unit exceeds one page, in most cases they are one-third to half a page long. The titles of the chapters and their subdivisions consist mainly of systematic comparative terms, the whole book thus appears like a topology of Daoism cast into the five main vessels of 1. an introduction

that does not introduce the book but rather the theme in giving the historical ‘Background to Daoism’ in the ancestral cult of the Shang, *Yijing* divination and Warring States philosophical schools; 2. a first part that introduces the ‘Foundations’ of the two books *Daode jing* and *Zhuangzi* as well as concepts relating to health and immortality and ideas about the cosmos, gods and governance; 3. a second part that provides an overview of the historical development of Daoism with introductions to the main schools (15 pp.), ethics/community, pantheon and religious practices (the kind of systematic comparative terms referred to above); 4. a third part that focuses on modern Daoism in China and the West; and a fourth part that is called ‘Reflections’ and presents concluding thoughts on ‘Key characteristics of Daoism,’ ‘Evolution of study,’ ‘Current trends,’ and ‘Activities and resources’ including academic associations, publications, useful dictionaries, websites, international conferences and workshops. The book thus is a topological introduction to Daoism that has many characteristics of a practical manual, a dictionary or a catalogue.

Although Kohn tries to arrange the topics in a chronological order the many units are often not connected to each other and appear as listings of information. We do not find lengthy quotes of Daoist texts and very little historical narrative, in the entire book 12 lines are devoted to Zhang Daoling, for example, one of the most adored figures in Daoism, there are no attempts to interpret meanings of texts or practices à la Robinet, Schipper (even in his topological *Corps taoïste*) or in the way Kohn did herself in *Early Chinese Mysticism* and other books. The strength of this kind of arrangement is that it manages to include a great part of the innumerable aspects of Daoism. Its weakness lies in the lack of a red thread that links these manifold aspects, a thread that would be particularly helpful for the organisation of the kind of basic and introductory knowledge that the book intends to impart to the beginner students for whom it is written.

Any introduction on such a vast religious culture as “Daoism” necessarily has to focus on some aspects and to neglect other aspects. This book is extremely rich in scope and builds on the exceptionally broad erudition of an author who like few others is able to formulate research based generalisations. Students, however, do not always understand these generalisations as reductive résumés of lengthy studies but take them as authoritative predications. Further misunderstandings might occur with the term “Modern Daoism” (chap. 10) which refers to 10th–16th century Daoism and does not cover the period between 1500 and 1945 which (for no clear reasons) is absent in the book. A great strength in the first chapters is the inclusion of a number of excavated manuscripts that provide an important context of early Daoism. However, some mistakes can be found in the presentation of the transmitted

early texts: the *Yijing* was not compiled by Confucius around 500 BC (p. 5), legalism was not first formulated by Xunzi (p. 10), Yin and Yang do not play any role in the *Daode jing* (as repeatedly mentioned on pp. 24 and 25), they are mentioned only incidentally in chapter 42 of the Wang Bi version but the whole chapter does not appear either in the Guodian fragments or in the Mawangdui version A, while in Mawangdui version B exactly this passage is missing so we don't know whether Yin and Yang were mentioned there. There are also no indications that the sage in the *Daode jing* acts 'like a sacred shaman king,' he also does not, in my view, 'impart purity and harmony to others' (p. 26) or 'leads the country to a full recovery of cosmic harmony' (p. 27). In chapter 2 on *Zhuangzi* two major aspects of the text are missing, the many important passages on language and logic and the strong humour which characterizes his unique style. Missing is also a selective bibliography with major introductory works at the end; that the chapter bibliographies ignore the whole non-English (especially the rich French) literature on Daoism is in my view an utterly wrong signal to American and English students.

Apart from these few shortcomings the book is an extremely helpful and rich source for the introductory study of Daoism. It contains many themes that are missing in other introductions such as the last chapters on contemporary Daoism and reflections on the nature and study of Daoism. If it overloads beginners with too many unrelated facts it still gives them a very good sense of the great complexity and diversity of the Daoist tradition, its main veins and manifestations. It is, in my view, a hugely useful and valuable general map for those who take it as a guiding manual to the intricate landscape of Daoism and are willing to advance further into it by following the advice in the carefully chosen suggestions for further reading included in the book.

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